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ABSTRACT

After presenting a series of assumptions about the teaching of playwriting (for example, that students can be taught the craft, if not the art, of playwriting; students must be kept to a strict deadline if they are to develop into disciplined writers; and playwriting should never be discussed outside the context of production possibilities), this article describes several inclass writing assignments designed to develop creativity as well as plotting, beat work (a "beat" is the minimal script unit as far as structure and planning are concerned), and dialogue expertise. It suggests that young writers' inventiveness can be increased by having them write down in 90 seconds all the uses they can think of for a common object such as a book end. To develop skill in transforming a static opening situation into a suspenseful drama, the article recommends having students list possible events propelling a main character into conflict. The article suggests that students can gain expertise in beat work (introducing, developing and resolving a conflict, for example) by working a given piece of dialogue into an episode with a dramatic climax and resolution. All the exercises described help students move from the abstraction of the teacher's lecture to practice and skill development. (MM)

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"Five Finger Exercises for the Novice Playwright"

by

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This paper was presented at the American Theatre Association Convention on 9 August 1983 as part of a panel entitled "Teaching the Playwright: What Actually Works."

I intend to focus my remarks on a narrow segment of our topic, but before I turn to it, I shall set forth a few premises about the teaching of playwriting, premises I will present without defense because I offer them merely as a foundation for my basic argument.

Premise One: he who wishes to write plays can do so perfectly well with no recourse to formal instruction. I hardly need cite the history that supports that assertion.

Premise Two: the craft of playwriting can be taught--assuming one agrees that craft, akin to laying brick or cobbling shoes, is an essential part of playwriting. Whether art can be taught I am not sure. But then, I make no attempt to teach art. If art resides within the student, you and I will be well advised to nurture and encourage it, but I won't presume to teach it. A concommitant of this premise is my belief that when I am done with the business of teaching playwriting I will have more cause for satisfaction if my students number a large group of successful sit-com writers rather than one Strindberg. The Strindberg would be a phenomenon hardly needing me; the competent hacks might attest to my ability to instill craft.

From this follows my Third Premise: all playwriting instruction is basic--there is no advanced. When the student has mastered the essentials of plotting, characterization, and dialogue, instruction ceases and informed critical response takes its place. We can teach craft; we can only respond to art.

To return to the basic class then, the only kind I will discuss, I will offer a Fourth Premise: talent is common; talent combined with know-how is rare; talent, know-how, and discipline in combination are priceless. Therefore, the good playwriting teacher is an authoritarian who crams the habit of hard, organized, purposeful labor down the throats of his students. John McNamara, an obscenely young man who recently won the Dramatists Guild Young Playwrights competition, put it this way: "A

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good teacher will give you a set of guidelines and he will never let you stray from them. He always kicks you in the butt if you're lazy, but he never constricts what you want to say or what you want to do."

From this follows another working Premise: the deadline system is essential--the more rigid, the better. I say when the first outline is due, the revised outline, the draft, and the rewrite. And I have finally arrived at the point where only verifiable illness gains an extension. We may not be artists, inspiration may not surface, but we can lay bricks on schedule or go do something else.

It also follows that the playwriting teacher, as opposed to the coach of an advanced writer, should require the student to write to a model --a model can be taught. Thus, I admit no surrealism, dada, happenings, sketches, rock music events, or sensitive meanderings. The only allowed approach--the required obstacle course--is the realistic play with specific characterization, sensible dialogue, conflict, and action that develops through suspense and crisis to an interesting, clear-cut climax and resolution--some variant of the well-made play. That can be taught. As for artistic freedom, let the student earn it.

(Parenthetically, I think basic playwriting students should not be allowed within a shelf length of Harold Pinter or any other dramatist who make a stock-in-trade of ambiguity. This is no slur on the mature artist, Pinter or any other, who uses ambiguity, even chaos, as a means to make points about life. But the beginning student who has Pinter as a model is likely to mistake his own muddiness for purposeful ambiguity and believe his confusion to be a virtue. I think there are no better models than O'Neill or Chekhov one-acts, plays which, however minor, set forth dramatic event in unmistakeable terms.)

Premise Seven: playwriting should never be discussed outside the context of production possibilities. My basic approach to this is that every decision the playwright makes is a money decision. That is, every single word, prop, gesture, or character either adds to the economic burden of production or does not. In class, we seek in our thinking to approximate the real world of the theatre, a world in which scripts are frequently rejected on the mere grounds of production demands.

Finally, and this is not so much a premise as a reflection of the premise we will focus on in a moment, I use no text in Introductory Playwriting --the only non-tutorial playwriting class I teach. There are two reasons for this. First, I want students to write for every class--not read. I don't give exams, I give assignments. Second, I don't think there's an appropriate introductory text on the market today. (There are a number of valuable texts which I recommend or require for advanced students who, having a few scripts under their belts, are ready to make the most of such books.) All a student buys for my intro

course is a book of one-act plays, and we read those in the classroom, not out, so we can clarify technical points by example.

So, a few premises and prejudices having been established as background, I should declare what we'll focus on the rest of the way--the writing a student does in the classroom--specific exercises that we write, read aloud, and discuss in class as preparation for the writing the student does at home.

I should preface this discussion by saying that when I began teaching playwriting about fifteen years ago, I didn't make a regular practice of having students write in the classroom. Instead, I prepared numerous and lengthy erudite lectures and led long discussions of dramaturgical theory. I suppose this is common enough among beginning drama professors--few of us are taught how to teach, and I, for one, had never had a regular group class in playwriting in my student days--I had merely written a number of produced plays.

As I gathered teaching experience, I began slowly to supplement my own verbosity and the reading and discussion of student out-of-class assignments with bits of in-class writing. Gradually it dawned on me that the less I talked and the more I set students to trying my instructions on the spot instead of at home, the better the work I was finally receiving from them. Eventually I reached the point where my students were writing in almost every class session. That is, I begin a class by outlining writing objectives of a particular sort and then set the students to trying to achieve them on the spot as a written exercise, after which we read and discuss the attempts.

This means that my students spend anywhere from ten to thirty minutes of class time writing with the result that I suffer Puritan guilt for sitting there reading a book during that time. But improved results seem to leave me no out.

I should point out a couple of things: one, in-class exercises are never collected or graded--that's reserved for out-of-class work. Thus, exercises can be attempted freely, uninhibited by anxiety. Two, exercise work is always on story premises outlined by me--that is, they can't be taken from the class and plugged into the student's major project, the writing and rewriting of a one-act play. That work will have to be started fresh at home.

For the purpose of the remainder of this discussion. I'll divide the in-class exercises I use into four categories, discussing in detail only one or two exercises in each category. We'll consider the categories of creativity, plotting, beat work, and dialogue.

I'm using the word creativity to suggest a whole matrix of things connected to the business of getting work done, never mind its quality. What I'm talking about is forcing the student to get off the dime, take chances, and move ahead with the nerve that I think playwriting takes. I often say to students that the dramatic writer need not be intellectually brilliant, though some are. What he must be is brave enough to make things happen on stage--the wild, the wonderful, the peculiar, the apalling. And I encourage my students, who often bog down because they think only the seldom appearing bitch-goddess inspiration can empower them to move ahead, to see the invention of action and event as a non-mystery. That is, I propose to them that creativity--invention--is not a matter of receiving from the Muse the hidden right answer to the question "what happens next?" but recognizing the universe of possible answers, many of which may be useful, and picking the one the writer likes.

For example, if boy and girl are stuck in an elevator, the universe of possible next events includes: the girl begins to give birth; the boy makes a pass; the elevator lights go out; the girl tries to sell the boy a zit ointment. Not one of these events or any of the thousand others we could think of is either right or wrong. But one is likely to please the writer most and help him move ahead. Thus, I spend much time trying to help the student see the universe of possibilities inherent in any set of circumstances so that he can pick that one event he likes. Toward this end, I use the exercise in which every student writes down in ninety seconds all the uses he can think of for an object I bring to class, say a bookend. I praise quantitative productivity, and the student who comes up with the use deemed by the class the most amusingly crazy but still logical wins a prize.

I use a variety of add on exercises. That is, I circulate sheets topped by opening dialogue, actions, or plot events and each student in turn adds a speech, action, or event, after which we read the product, again with the idea of demonstrating that the moment, wherever it comes from, provides the writer a universe of possibilities.

An exercise I find particularly helpful is the Decision Maker. After I have discussed the importance in plotting of that event which turns a static opening situation into suspenseful drama--an event variously called the attack, the inciting incident, the collision scene, [illegible] my personal language, the catalytic event, I distribute a one p[illegible] summary of given circumstances which might introduce a play--cha[illegible] basics, locale, past events, etc. The student is told to list many different concrete events--anything from the onslaught of a fatal disease to the revelation of a previously hidden feeling--any of which can propell the main character into conflict. In every case, of course, such an event reveals a need to both character and audience and has the effect of changing a static situation to a dramatic one. The students read their lists of possible catalytic events and we discuss the sort

of plays which might ensue. I emphasize that many of the events, even those that sound silly at first, turn out to show promise for propelling a play forward and that rightness turns out not to be as important as usefulness. I try to move the student toward seeing creativity as a matter of recognizing the wealth of useful possibilities already available in his universe.

The Decision Maker is obviously related to plotting as well as to the general area of creativity. Another exercise helpful in the plotting area is the Fast Plot. Here a student gets four or five minutes to fill out the blanks on a brief plot form. On the handout he sees this: "1) We meet _____ and _____ in (at or on) _____. 2) _____ discovers that _____ because _____. 3) Therefore, _____ _____ tries to _____ by means of _____, but fails because _____. 4) Then _____ _____ tries to _____ with the result that _____.

I may fill in the first blanks--say I'll give the students a sailor or shore leave, an old lady, and an amusement park. The student takes those elements to a complete, howbeit simplified plot in a few minutes, after which we read and discuss. I hope thereby to inculcate the ideas of causal relationships, concrete action, and closure. By the way, here and elsewhere I try to impress upon my students what I believe to be the most useful word in the playwright's thinking process, the verb to try, as in "the sailor tries to win the prize for the old lady."

I find beat work (my approach to which owes much to Sam Smiley's Playwriting: the Structure of Action) to be very useful, so useful that I don't hesitate to repeat it ad nauseum. That is, I give the students some circumstances operating at the beginning of a beat (the minimal script unit as far as structure and planning are concerned) and tell them what information I want conveyed in a character or exposition or plot or conflict beat and then give them fifteen minutes to write it. In the ensuing discussion we talk about the beat's structure--introduction, development, and conclusion--its economy, whether it conveyed the target information clearly, and its general virtues. Then, like as not, I may set the students to doing the very same job again, but this time by means of a totally different method. For example, if you developed your character beat by means of someone else talking about the character in question, this time make the same character point by showing the character in action. Or, if you handled an expository beat by means of a phone call, do it now through stage business or two character reminiscence.

One of my favorite beat exercises is the Cricis/Climax Beat Handout. I give the students a sheet with two or three speeches at the top and say "take the beat from there--continue dialogue and action in such a way that it develops into a dramatic crisis, rises in tension, and resolves itself in a clear result of the immediate conflict, a climax."

For instance, they get these lines from a play you may recognize:

LONNIE: You was in Ko-rea?

SKIP: Damn right. Blastin' them gooks. Ah was hell on wheels with a B. A. R. Regular John Wayne. Right, Red?

RED: That's what you keep tellin' everybody.

(From Preston Jones, The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia.)

I'll have my students develop that and many other beats through conflict and climax because I find that, although it may seem otherwise to those of us who have been at it for years, the sense of delight in conflict is not instinctive to every student who sits down to write a play.

In the area of dialogue, finally, I'll mention two of the numerous exercises I've tried. First, when I am talking about character speech profiles, i. e., finding character and expressing it through specific speech choices, I send my class out on a mission almost impossible--the Eavesdropping Assignment. They fan out from class to the Student Union and snoop. They sidle up to unwary talkers and record speech profiles--list habits of vocabulary, grammar, speech length and frequency, etc., and get all the juicy quotes they can. Then, back in class, they write a scene embodying the speech habits they found. What I hope to do, of course, is awaken my students to the incredible wealth of everyday talk and to the idea that people characterize themselves as much by how they say as by what they say.

Later, I set a hefty page of dialogue--self-composed--before my students for rewrite. Before that, we have discussed such dialogue principles as economy, simplicity, and imagery, such particulars as active verbs, climactic order, and sensual word choice. The students cut and rewrite the given text and then we discuss their language choices in terms of the basic thrust of the scene. Among other things, I hope that in-class editing of another writer's work will support positive habits of self-editing.

To conclude, I'm not confident that any of my in-class exercises are ideal for their purposes or the best of their kind. But I am confident of the wisdom of devoting more and more time to on-the-spot writing. Because I am now usually able to say "That's right--you've got the idea--it works," before a student has to try it on his lonesome, my students leave the class with growing confidence. Because they have done it to the beat of my stop watch, they know they can work to deadlines. Because they have taken a principle from abstraction to practice, they are more likely to remember it.

I have yet to produce a Strindberg and probably never will. But I am getting better craftsmanship from my students, and I'll settle for that.